

THE FEAST OF LAMPS

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By
CHARLET ROOT
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ROGER DUVOISIN



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THE FEAST OF LAMPS





An Indian courtyard

THE FEAST of LAMPS

A Story of India

By

CHARLET ROOT


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THE FEAST OF LAMPS



EENAKSHI was a little Hindu girl. She lived with her father and mother and her brother, Arumukam, in a village in India.

One morning Meenakshi woke up very early. As soon as she opened her eyes she remembered that it was her birthday. She was six years old today, and she was going with her family to visit the Temple in the big city of Madura. They were going to see the Feast of Lamps.

This was a feast that was held every year in the Temple, on this same day, in honor of the goddess Meenakshi. Little Meenakshi herself had been named after this goddess.

In India, when a little girl is born on the feast day of a goddess, she is often given that goddess's name, just as little girls in other countries are sometimes named after saints. This was what had happened when Meenakshi was born.

It made Meenakshi feel very important now to remember that she had the very same name, and the very same feast day, as the great goddess whose statue she was going to see in the Temple at Madura.

The Feast of Lamps was a very grand affair. Thousands of people from all over the country would be there. The journey to Madura would take nearly all day in the ox cart. It was a long trip for a little girl of six, but Meenakshi felt sure she would not get tired.

The household was already astir. Out in the yard she could hear her father moving about, feeding the



Mother just poured a pot of water over her

oxen. She could hear the clinking of brass pots as her mother prepared the morning meal.

She scrambled up from her sleeping mat and ran out into the yard for her bath. The bath was a very simple one. Mother just poured a pot of water over her. The cows and oxen, a donkey and a goat or two who also lived in the yard, paid no attention but went on eating as though nothing was happening. They had often seen little Meenakshi take her bath.

Dressing was an easy matter, for little Hindu girls do not wear many clothes. Over her green blouse Meenakshi wore only a long strip of cloth, called a *seelai*. She wore a new one, made just for the feast, and it was a bright red. She just wound it around her body like a skirt, tucked the end in over her shoulder and she was all ready.

Her mother was making cakes for breakfast. Meenakshi wasn't very hungry; she was too excited to think about eating. Arumukam, her brother, was ten years old and had been to Madura before. So he wasn't nearly

so excited, and he could eat the good rice cakes, both his sister's share as well as his own.

“Oh, *Amma*, is it really today that we go to see the goddess Meenakshi?”

Her mother smiled.

“Yes, little sister, it really is!”

Meenakshi's black hair looked smooth and shiny after her mother, or *amma*—the Hindu word for mother, had oiled it. She fastened a bright tinsel ornament at the end of her braid.

Now they were all ready to start. The cart was loaded with straw for the oxen, a present for Meenakshi's uncle and aunt who lived in Madura, their own lunch of cooked rice and plantains, besides a number of brass pots for water.

Meenakshi wanted to help her mother and ran around the cart, first on one side and then on the other. A donkey was coming along down the narrow street. Meenakshi didn't see him in time, and bumped right against him so hard that it knocked her down.



The donkey was almost as surprised as she was. He waggled one of his long grey ears and waited patiently for her to get up. Meenakshi wanted to cry, but she didn't, because the donkey looked so sorry for her. Instead she picked herself up and shook the dust off her *seelai*. It was lucky that she had fallen on a dry place.



The donkey was almost as surprised as she was

The cart stood on big wheels, high from the ground, and Meenakshi had to be boosted up into it. Arumukam, who was much bigger, climbed up by himself on to the pole in front between the two black oxen. He was rather proud to be driving, instead of his father. He gave the animals a poke with his foot and shouted to them to go on. The heavy wheels began to turn with a slow creak and crunch.

Meenakshi was quite content to sit in the straw near her father where she could look out in front. All at once she saw her two little friends, Janaki and Pushpam, waving to her from their own ox cart just ahead. They, too, were going to the Feast and they both had on new *seelais*. Janaki's was blue and Pushpam's was bright green. For a time the two carts kept close together, and the little girls could chatter back and forth.

Although it was early the road was already crowded with cattle and sheep and goats, all going to the fields to graze. There were women balancing water pots on their heads and men carrying big bales of straw.

Arumukam had to drive slowly most of the time. He had no reins. When he wanted the oxen to go faster, he twisted their tails. When he had to turn out for someone, then he tickled the oxen on their backbones or slapped their hind legs. He made all sorts of queer noises, and the oxen seemed to know just what the noises meant.

Many other families were going to the Feast of Lamps. Some of them had two-wheeled carts drawn by only one ox and others traveled in a small *jutka*, a carriage with a top. This was drawn by a pony that went dashing along so fast that riding in it looked most uncomfortable. Because the streets were so narrow and crowded it took a long while to reach the open country.

On their way Meenakshi passed the village well where her mother got water, and the rice fields where her father worked every day; and the little temple or shrine with the painted horses out in front.

“You know, *tungachee*, little sister,” said her mother, “you must be a very good girl and keep tight hold

of my hand when we get to town. For there will be crowds of people all trying to see the god and goddess when they come riding out of the Temple in their big car. There will be hundreds of other little girls also named Meenakshi after the goddess, just as you are. It is very easy to get lost in such a big crowd.”

Meenakshi promised to be good. She sat very quietly thinking about the wonderful things she would see, and wondering about all those other little girls named Meenakshi.

Pretty soon they reached the big village where she often went to market with her mother. It was Fair day, and many people were crowding the streets and bazars and buying all sorts of things. Meenakshi saw one family already starting for home. They had done a lot of shopping; each one of them had something that he had bought.

The boy was leading a cow and carrying a little calf over his shoulders. The mother had a big bundle of firewood on her head. A small girl beside her had a pot of



Arumukam had to drive slowly

oil which she too was trying to carry on her head. But she was too young to manage this, so in the end she had to carry it under her arm.

Meenakshi wished she could tell this little girl about the time she tried to carry a clay pot of buttermilk on her head. She remembered how slippery it had been and how she felt it going—going—till at last in spite of all she could do the jug fell and broke all to pieces, and the buttermilk splashed all over her nice clean *seelai*.

At the Fair everyone got out of his cart to look about. Meenakshi saw stalls with all kinds of fruits—mangos, pawpaws, fresh figs, cocoanuts, and many more. Which did she want, limes or tangerines? She liked them both. In the end her father bought a cocoanut, and after they all had a drink of the sweet milk inside he broke the hard shell open and gave them each a piece of the nut.

Meenakshi liked best the booths where ornaments were sold. She wanted some glass bracelets particu-

larly. They hung in big bunches of all colors, dark red, every shade of green, pink and blue. Some were just plain glass but many had little gold spots on them.

“*Amma*, please let me buy some bracelets,” she begged. “Mine are nearly all broken.”

“You may buy some,” said her mother.

It took quite a long time for Meenakshi to decide which color she liked best. At last she chose a blue set with gold spots.

“I will put them on for you,” said the shopkeeper. He was a fat, jolly looking man who wore a large red turban on his head.

The bracelets didn’t look big enough to go over Meenakshi’s brown hand, but the man knew how to put them on for her. He told her to sit down on a mat and then he squatted down in front of her. “Hold out your hand,” he said.

Meenakshi felt suddenly frightened. “Will it hurt much?” she asked. She thought perhaps she had better get a toy instead of the bracelets.

The shopkeeper laughed. "It won't hurt much," he said, "and the bracelets are worth it."

Meenakshi held out her small hand. When he began closing the bracelets she cried, "Ouch, ouch!" But it really didn't hurt at all.

"There you are," said the man, and sure enough, the bracelets were all on her wrist, and couldn't fall off again unless she played too hard and broke them.

Arumukam stood looking on with a superior air. He didn't care much for these fancy-ware stalls. What he liked to look at were the cattle. Nevertheless he bought a tin whistle and ran off to show it to his father.

Meenakshi joined her two little friends and they visited the flower stalls, where Pushpam bought a garland of yellow marigolds. She slipped it over her head and wore it all day. Janaki liked toys best, and she bought a red and white pinwheel. It spun around in the wind and made a pleasant whirring sound.

There were so many people, and Meenakshi was pushed about so much that it was hard to keep hold of



The shopkeeper laughed. "It won't hurt much," he said

her mother's hand. So she was glad when she was lifted into the cart again, and the family set off on their way.

Presently the sun grew very hot, so they stopped under a big banyan tree to rest. This one tree was really like a whole grove of trees together, for wherever the branches had bent over and touched the ground they made new trees growing all by themselves. Not much sunlight came through the leaves, so it was cool. Here they sat on the ground and ate their noon meal.

Up above in the branches were monkeys eating the red banyan berries. Every now and then a berry would slip from their paws and fall plop—sometimes right on Meenakshi's head. This made her jump with surprise.

Mother unpacked the cold rice and the plantains. The monkeys wanted some too. They swung on the boughs overhead watching their chance to steal a bite. One bold fellow with a red face was bound he would have Meenakshi's plantain. Quick as a flash he swung down by his tail and snatched it out of her hand just as

she was opening her mouth to eat it. Next moment the thief was up over her head again, gobbling away exactly as if the plantain belonged to him.

“*Aiyo, aiyo*, he’s got my plantain!” Meenakshi screamed.

“Never mind, here’s another,” said her mother. “But this time be careful.”

“I’ll keep him off,” cried Arumukam, clapping his hands to scare the monkey away.

“I suppose he was hungry, but he shan’t have this one,” said Meenakshi, and she crammed it into her mouth as fast as she could.

After lunch everyone lay down to rest in the shade. Meenakshi and her two friends tried to take a nap like the others, but they were too wide awake. So they jumped up to try and find something to do.

“What’s going on over there by those cocoanut trees?” asked Pushpam.

“I see a lot of blue and red and yellow,” said Meenakshi, “and I hear music too.”



So they ran across the field



“Mother wouldn’t mind if we just went over there and came right back,” said Janaki.

“Hadn’t we better ask first?” Meenakshi said.

“No, come along,” cried Janaki. “We’ll stay only a minute.”

So they ran across the field and found a crowd of people. They were all dressed in bright colors. Some of them were jingling tambourines, others were tapping drums with their fingers, while in the center were two women dancing to the music.

“Who are they?” asked Meenakshi.

“I know,” said Pushpam. “They’re gypsies. Let’s go nearer.”

“Aren’t you scared?” whispered Meenakshi.

“I’m not,” said Janaki. “Come on.”

So they watched the dancing. They saw a gypsy woman with a baby on her hip. The baby wore a square orange cap with long green tassels at each corner.

“Oh, what a darling baby!” cried Meenakshi.

“I’d rather look at the baby monkeys over there,” said Pushpam. “I’d love to play with them.” She moved up closer as she spoke.

“Look out, don’t get too near,” said a man, pulling her back.

“Will they hurt us?”

“The mother might bite if you touched them.”

“Yes,” said Meenakshi. “I know about that,” and she told them how once an old hen flew onto her head when she picked up one of her baby chicks.

“But monkeys have more sense than hens,” said Pushpam, “I’m not afraid of her!” And she moved forward a little.

Just then the mother monkey began to swing down from the tree. Perhaps she heard what Pushpam said, for she showed her sharp teeth and she did not look at all friendly. So Pushpam decided to keep away.

“Oh dear, I wish we had something to feed them.” They all spoke out loud together. “What can we give them?”

A fat gypsy woman heard the little girls, and came over to them. She had a large flat basket on her head. She set it down and said, “O-ho, here’s what you want. Have you any money?”

Meenakshi pulled out a small coin from the corner of her *seelai*. She had been saving it to spend at the Temple booths.

“Then you can buy some of these cakes to feed the monkeys.”

“I know what I want,” cried Pushpam reaching out her hand. But Janaki pulled her back.

“It’s Meenakshi’s money. She ought to choose first.”

“And hurry up about it too,” cried Pushpam.

“But I don’t know which kind I like best.”

“They’re all good,” said the gypsy, smiling.

“I think it’s this one,” said Meenakshi at last, picking out a *jellaby*—a jelly cake with syrup inside of it.”

“Now it’s your turn, Pushpam.”

Pushpam chose a bright pink sugar candy and Janaki a round cocoanut cake.

“Now let’s feed the monkeys,” said Meenakshi.

“I want to eat mine myself,” Pushpam said.

“I know,” said Janaki. “Let’s divide the *jellaby* and the candy, and feed the cocoanut cake to the monkeys.” So very carefully, because she was the oldest, Janaki divided them.

“Don’t go too near,” said the man. “Put the pieces on the ground and they’ll get them.”

The little monkeys were not a bit afraid and came



"I think it's this one," said Meenakshi at last

swinging down to help themselves. The mother monkey came too, and snatched a big piece for herself.

“She looks cross still,” said Meenakshi, getting hold of Janaki’s hand. “I’m not going any nearer.”

“Who’s afraid!” cried Pushpam. “I’m going to stroke that baby one just once.” She reached out her hand, and quick as a flash the old monkey bit it.

“*Aiyo, aiyo,*” Pushpam screamed, the tears rolling down her face.

“What did I tell you,” said the man. “Now run back to your mothers, all of you!”

Meenakshi ran so fast she was all out of breath and Janaki tried to pull Pushpam along. She was still screaming, “*Aiyo, aiyo.*”

Her screams woke everybody up and they all talked at once while Pushpam’s mother bandaged her hand. It was only a little bite, but Pushpam cried at the top of her voice.

“It’s time to be going,” said Meenakshi’s father, pointing to the sun. So everyone climbed into the carts

again, and they were soon on the way toward Madura.

Meenakshi sat cross-legged on the straw in the corner of the cart. She slipped her new bracelets up and down her arm, and listened to their pleasant jingle. She played with some banyan tree berries which she had picked up. Presently she began to feel tired and sleepy. She didn't care any more about the bracelets or the berries. The noises around seemed to be a long, long way off.

Her eyes kept shutting and when she opened them everything looked blurred. The berries slipped from her fingers one by one and rolled away. The bracelets couldn't get away or they might have gone too. In a few minutes she was asleep and had forgotten about everything.

"Wake up, Meenakshi, wake up!" Arumukam was pulling her arm.

"What is it?" she cried sitting up in a daze.

"Wake up, we're here!"

It didn't take Meenakshi long to get wide awake.



She jumped down from the cart and took tight hold
of her mother's hand as they pushed through the crowd.



Everyone was shouting and jostling one another along the narrow street that led to the Temple.

Meenakshi looked up at the enormous gateway as they passed underneath. It had a high tower, covered with thousands of carved figures. Inside, the Temple seemed bigger still. It was so big it made Meenakshi feel very small indeed. It was like a whole city in itself, with its corridors leading off in all directions. It had many courts with bazars where they sold flowers and images and brassware of all kinds. Everywhere incense was burning and the smell hung heavy on the air.

They visited the Golden Lily Tank. This was a large square pool with stone steps leading down to it. Many people were bathing here in the holy water, and Meenakshi and her family went down into the pool too and washed their faces and hands. Her mother filled a brass pot with the holy water, to take home with them.

Beyond the Golden Lily Tank they came to the Hall of a Thousand Pillars. This was very wonderful. Meenakshi stood for a long time looking at the different figures carved on the columns.

Nearby in one of the corridors were parrots and

cockatoos with bright colored feathers. Someone told Meenakshi that these birds could talk, but she couldn't make out a word they said. She was so interested in the parrots that for the first time she forgot to keep hold of her mother's hand.

The parrots kept chattering and squawking, and Meenakshi stood listening to them, until all at once she looked round for her mother. She was nowhere in sight!

A dreadful lump came up into Meenakshi's throat. She hurried first in one direction and then in another, but there were so many people and so many corridors it was impossible to go everywhere at once. She was so small that she couldn't look over the heads of the people round her. All she could see was just a forest of strange legs and feet. None of them looked like her mother's feet, or her father's or her brother's.

The crowd carried her right along. She kept crying out "*Amma! Amma!*" But no one paid any attention to her. She was terribly frightened. She thought: "Sup-

pose I never find *Amma* again!” And then that queer feeling came into her throat again, and she knew that if it didn’t stop she would have to cry.

Pretty soon she saw an opening through the legs and feet and she ran as fast as she could toward it. It was quieter here and she said to herself, “Perhaps *Amma* is here looking for me.” But there was no *amma*.

Meenakshi ventured a little farther. Suddenly she found herself in the open courtyard where the Temple elephants were kept. This frightened her still more, for she had never been so close to elephants before. She started to run away, but just then she saw some children throwing coins and she stopped to watch them. She wished now that she hadn’t spent her one coin for the monkeys. She would like to have thrown it to the baby elephant. He was picking up coins with his trunk and giving them to his keeper.

Step by step Meenakshi drew nearer till she could almost look up into the baby elephant’s mouth. While she stood there watching, the big elephant—perhaps it



She had never been so close to elephants before

was the baby elephant's mother—wound its trunk round the keeper and held him high up in the air. Meenakshi thought the man would surely be killed.

“*Aiyo, aiyo*, poor man!” she screamed.

A boy standing near laughed and said, “That’s only a trick. Watch him!”

The keeper walked up the trunk and onto the elephant’s back. Meenakshi laughed. She jumped up and down and clapped her hands. “I’d like to do that too!” She quite forgot for a minute that she was lost. “What big feet he has! I hope he won’t step on anyone.”

“Elephants don’t step on people unless they mean to kill them,” said the boy. “Where are your father and mother? Haven’t you any family?”

This made Meenakshi remember again, and the tears began to roll down her cheeks.

“*Aday, aday*, I’m lost! I’ve looked and looked everywhere and I can’t find my mother.”

The boy tried to comfort her.

“That’s too bad. But you’ll find her pretty soon.

She'll be coming this way. Everybody comes to look at the elephants. Here, take this sweet-cake. It's good. Don't cry any more. I've been lost lots of times but I always get found again. Nobody stays lost. You'll see!"

This comforted Meenakshi. She munched the cake and wandered around thinking that if nobody stayed lost it could not be long before she found her family. Surely they must be beyond that next corner—or the next—or the next. But they never were. She began to feel very tired and thought she couldn't go much further, but she still walked on. What else could she do? All at once she caught sight of her brother, right in front of her.

"Arumukam, Arumukam," she screamed, "Arumukam!" She ran as fast as she could to catch up with him. He stopped when he heard her and said:

"Hello, Meenakshi! Where's the rest of the family?"

"I don't know, I've lost them," she cried, as soon as she could get her breath.

"Then we're both lost! I've been trying to find them myself for a long time."



“What shall we do?”

“I don’t know,” said Arumukam.

“But we have to find them.”

“Yes, but how?” said her brother gloomily. “This is a big place to look for anyone.”

“A boy back there told me people never stayed lost, so perhaps we won’t.”

“That isn’t much comfort when you’re still lost.”



"This is a big place to look for anyone."

“Oh yes, it is,” said Meenakshi, holding onto his hand as if she would never let go. “I’m so glad I found you. It’s much nicer to be lost with somebody. Aren’t you awfully glad we found each other?”

Arumukam said that he was, but he still looked worried.

They came out of the Temple into the street. There was no use looking for their family in such a mob of people, so they decided to go along with the rest. Indeed that was all they could do, for everyone was pushing and crowding, trying to get down the street to the head of the procession.

Meenakshi knew why everyone was rushing. Once a year the images of the god and goddess were taken out of the Temple and given a ride through the streets to a big square lake called the Teppakulam. There they were put on a raft and taken around the lake three times. After this they were carried back to the Temple to stay till the next festival.

“I do wish we could get to the head of the proces-



sion. I want to see the elephants,” said Arumukam.

“I want to see the goddess,” said Meenakshi.

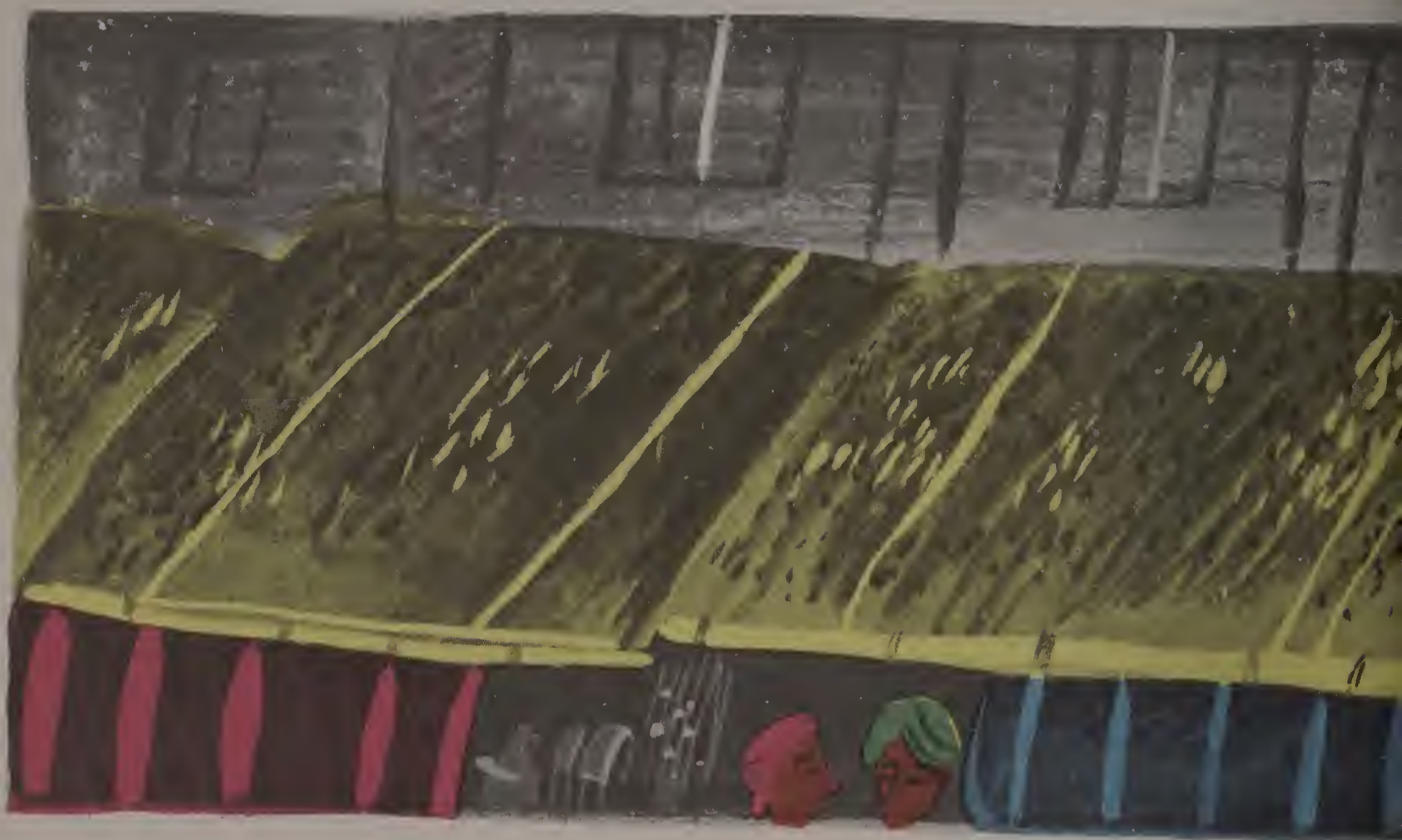
They walked on. There seemed to be no end to the long street. At last her brother said,

“We can’t ever get to the lake through all this crowd.”

Just then a nice thing happened. A *jutka*, drawn by a little pony, stopped right in front of them. Arumukam looked at the cart and Meenakshi looked at Arumukam. They both had the same idea at the same time.

“I wish we could ride,” she said.

“That’s just what I was wishing too.”



The man driving the cart must have heard them, for he called out, "O-ho, so you'd like to ride. Where's your family?"

"We've lost them," said Arumukam.

"That's too bad," said the man. "Get in with us. We're going straight up to the head of the procession. Help your sister into the cart. She can sit inside with my little girl and her mother, and you can climb up here in front with me."



"O-ho, so you'd like to ride. Where's your family?"

“How can you get ahead of so many people?” asked Arumukam, sitting down beside him.

“I’ll show you,” the man said and turned down a side street. “We’ll go clear around and come out in front of the procession where we can see everything.”

Meenakshi felt happy at last. “Now I shall see the goddess,” she thought.

It was good to be riding instead of walking in the dust and the crowd. She sat down cross-legged beside the girl, who smiled at her shyly. Meenakshi liked her right away. She had beautiful long hair, much longer than her own, and wore many more bracelets.

“What’s your name?” asked Meenakshi.

“Lakshmi. What’s yours?”

“Meenakshi.”

“Why, that’s the name of the goddess!”

“Yes, they named me after her,” Meenakshi said proudly. “That’s why *Amma* let me come today.”

“How did you get lost?” asked Lakshmi.

“I was watching the parrots and I let go of *Amma*’s

hand. My brother says he doesn't see how we are ever going to find her again."

"Oh, but you'll have to! You can't go around like this, without any father and mother. Nobody ever does."

"No, I suppose not. Pushpam and Janaki have a mother."

"Who are they?" asked the girl.

"They're my best friends." She added quickly: "But I like you too. Where do you live?"

"Right here in Madura. That's why my father knows his way around so well."

"Are you hungry?" asked Lakshmi's mother.

"A little bit," said Meenakshi shyly.

"Your brother must be hungry too. Boys are always hungry!" So she gave them each a plantain.

After quite a while they reached the main road again. Here they were ahead of the procession, which was just coming in sight. The people began to shout louder than ever and the drums and bands made a great noise.

The three children, and Lakshmi's parents, all scram-

bled down from the *jutka*. It was difficult for them all to stay together but Meenakshi kept hold of her brother's hand. Once a big man pushed in between them and she fell down.

Arumukam was close behind her, and helped her up again, but by the time they looked around their new friends had disappeared.

The crowd was so big now that they could hardly move. Meenakshi was too short to see anything. She began to wonder whether she would be able to get even a peek at the goddess; and besides it was getting quite dark. At last they were pushed clear to the side of the street and that was lucky, for Arumukam found a big stone with a flat place on top of it where the two children could stand and see everything.

First came the Temple elephant. He was tremendous. He towered above everybody. He looked as if he thought himself the most important creature in the procession. He walked very proudly, lifting his huge legs slowly and surely.



First came the Temple elephant

On the back of the elephant were rich, golden hangings embroidered at the corners. Around his neck were long tassels and gilt balls and his trunk was painted with red and white and gold patterns. He kept swinging it about as he walked. His ears were painted too, and they flapped back and forth. Meenakshi felt sure that he was the tallest and biggest elephant in the world.

“See his bells,” cried Arumukam.

“What a pretty sound they make!” said Meenakshi.

“Watch him. See that big brass bell on this side of him? Right there.” Arumukam pointed with his finger.

“Well, when he takes a step it rings. When he takes another step the bell on the other side rings. Every single step he takes makes a bell ring.”

And now the crowd pushed and stared more eagerly than ever. The god and goddess were coming at last. What an enormous car they had! It was made of wood and so high that Meenakshi thought that if her house and Janaki’s and Pushpam’s were set on top of each other, they would hardly reach to the top of it. It was



covered with flowers and tinsel streamers and flags. The wheels were solid and higher than a man's head. They creaked and made a queer noise as they turned.

The whole car was terribly heavy, and it took a great many men, all tugging at the ropes, to drag it along. Even then it was all they could do to make the heavy wheels turn. Each time the men pulled they bent almost double and gave a long singing shout. The crowd joined in too. The singing, the shouting, the beating of drums and the blaring of bands, made so much noise that Meenakshi was almost deafened.



The images rode inside the car

The images rode inside the car. There sat the god Siva, and beside him his wife the goddess Meenakshi. They sat very still and seemed to enjoy being stared at. The goddess was covered with jewels and ornaments of gold. Her face was turned toward Meenakshi. It was almost as if she smiled.



“Isn’t she beautiful!” Meenakshi cried, “and she’s looking right at me! How I wish I could ride with her!”

Her brother replied: “You’d be scared sitting up so high, and besides you could never get up there.”

The procession moved on toward the lake where the raft was waiting. It was dark by now and thousands of small oil lamps were burning everywhere. Tiny lamps flickered around the edge of the water. They also flickered on the island in the center of the lake where there was a white temple in the midst of a garden. The temple was covered with lights too. There were so many of them that Meenakshi thought that there couldn’t be a light anywhere in the world that wasn’t to be seen there that night.

“Oh isn’t it lovely!” she whispered.

They were both too excited to worry about being lost now.

“I’d like to ride on the raft, wouldn’t you?” said Meenakshi.

“I wonder—” said Arumukam. He was thinking.

“It seems as if I ought to ride with the goddess because we both have the same name,” said Meenakshi.

“Let’s get closer,” said her brother, pulling her by the hand.

“Maybe we could slip onto the raft when nobody’s looking,” said Meenakshi. She looked at Arumukam. There was a very thoughtful expression on his face, and the more thoughtful he looked the more she felt sure that he would manage somehow to get her onto the raft so that she could ride with the goddess.

Suddenly her brother was all through thinking. He took hold of her arm and dragged her in and out of the crowd till they stood quite near the raft. A high platform had been built on top of it where the priests were going to sit. The sides were draped with garlands and paper streamers of all colors. There were lots of flags, too, and a wonderful throne for the god and goddess all draped with flowers and streamers.

“We’ll try to get under that platform,” said Arumukam.



“Where?” she whispered.

“Right down there. Come, I’ll show you.” He pulled her after him down the steps that led to the raft. The drums and bands, were making a terrible noise and men were blowing queer-looking trumpets.

Now the priests were carrying the images of the god and goddess down the steps. Meenakshi was so near that she could see how lovely the goddess really was. The goddess was still looking straight at her and smiling. It was just as if she wanted Meenakshi to ride on the raft too.



The temple was covered with lights

“See that big dark place in there?” said Arumukam. Meenakshi peeked in between the paper streamers. “Well, we’ll get in there,” Arumukan continued, “while everybody’s watching the priests. You wait till I say ‘now’ and then we’ll jump.”

“Oh!” breathed Meenakshi.

It seemed like a long time before Arumukam gave the signal, though it was only a few seconds. Suddenly a great shout went up as the priests put the idols on the raft.

“Now,” whispered Arumukam.

Quick as a flash they both dived under the platform like two little squirrels.

It was dark under there but they could peep out and see everything without being seen.

Soon the raft began to move slowly around the big lake. The lights reflected in the water looked prettier than ever, dancing and flickering on the ripples. The full moon, too, was just rising. And now the fireworks began. Meenakshi had never seen rockets before, and

she caught her breath as they hissed high in the air and burst into red, blue and yellow balls of fire.

The raft went around the lake three times before it stopped at the island. What was going to happen now? The two children peeped out. Some priests were coming out of the temple with offerings and garlands for the gods. They walked slowly and seemed in no hurry. It looked as if the raft might stay at the island some time.

Arumukam whispered, "Let's crawl out a minute and look at the Temple and the garden." So instead of staying safely hidden under the platform, they slipped through the paper streamers and left the raft to look at the flowers and the white Temple. This was a big mistake, for when they hurried back to the lake to get on the raft again, it had gone off and left them!

Arumukam was so surprised that for a minute he couldn't speak. Meenakshi thought that now they would have to stay on the island forever, with no way to get back and no mother to give them their supper. Big tears rolled down her cheeks and splashed over her red *seelai*.



Her brother tried to comfort her and to be brave in the midst of so much trouble. But he was almost ready to cry himself.

“How shall we ever find *Amma*? I’m tired of being lost!” Arumukam was tired of it, too, and began to look worried. They wandered around a little but nothing seemed interesting any more, not even the lights and the rockets.



Her brother tried to comfort her

“I’m sleepy, Arumukam,” said Meenakshi.

“So am I,” he replied, “and I’m hungry besides. Aren’t you?”

“Yes,” she said, “and I want *Amma*. *Aiyo, aiyo*, what can we do!”

Just then they saw a priest coming toward them. He seemed surprised to see them. They were too tired even to run away.

“Why are you here?” he asked sharply.

“Please, sir, we came on the raft and it went off and left us,” explained Arumukam.

“The raft? What were you doing on the raft?” His face looked very angry.

“We were riding on it—” began Meenakshi.

But the priest spoke quickly. “You rode on the sacred raft with Lord Siva and the Blessed Meenakshi!”

“Yes, sir, we did. My name is Meenakshi and I thought I ought to ride with her.” She was almost too frightened to speak. “She—she looked as if she wanted me to!”



“You did a very, very naughty thing,” the priest said.
“Where do you live?”

Arumukam told him. Meenakshi could see that her brother was scared, too.

“What caste are you?” He looked at them with his sharp black eyes. Arumukam told him.

The children were used to this question. They knew that everybody in India belonged to a particular caste, some high and some low, and that theirs was a respectable one.

“Well,” said the priest at last, “you were very bad children to get on the raft.” He walked back and forth on the garden path and looked as if he intended to stay cross. On top of everything else this was almost more than Meenakshi could bear. For she felt that awful things might happen.

At last the priest stopped in front of them and said: “Tell me more about this.”

“We’re very sorry, sir, we didn’t mean to be bad,” said Arumukam. “We’re lost. We can’t find our father and mother.”

“Lost your family? I’ll help you find them in the morning. But you’ll have to stay here tonight.” Then he looked a little more kindly and asked, “Are you hungry?”

“Yes, we are,” said Arumukam but Meenakshi could only cry: “*Aiyo, aiyo, I want my Amma.*”

The priest brought them each a bowl of rice and curry. He spread a mat for them near the Temple steps and told them they might sleep there.





The priest brought them rice and curry

All the time the priest seemed to be getting kinder and kinder, and when he said: “You’d better stop crying, Meenakshi,” he actually smiled a little, not much, but just enough to make her feel happier. So she did stop crying. She ate her curry and then snuggled up close to her brother and went to sleep.

It was very strange to wake up on the Temple steps the next morning. For a moment Meenakshi rubbed her eyes, staring round her in surprise. Then everything came back to her. She woke Arumukam. He, too, looked very bewildered at first. Then he jumped up and said: “Where’s the priest? I hope he won’t forget us.”

But the priest hadn’t forgotten them. Very soon they saw him coming. He was carrying a bowl in his hand. He had brought them their breakfast, rice gruel and plantains. And this morning he didn’t look a bit cross; his wrinkled face was quite friendly as he smiled down at them.

While they were eating he told them stories about the Hindu gods.



“I suppose,” said Arumukam, thinking hard, “that there’s a long line of gods, each one higher up than the god before.”

“Who is the top god, sir—away up top?” Meenakshi asked.

The priest did not answer at once. He looked very solemn. Then he said: “We have to be very, very good for a long time before we can know about the top god.”

Nobody spoke for a moment, and then Meenakshi said: “Tell us just one more story, sir.”

The priest smiled.



“I haven’t a single one left,” he said. “And besides, it’s time we began to look for your father and mother.”

Some steps led down the water’s edge, and here a little boat was tied. They got in, and the priest took them across the lake to the landing place. The sun shone down on the water, making little dancing ripples of light as the boat moved gently forward.

Everything looked so different this morning that Meenakshi could hardly believe that last night’s adven-



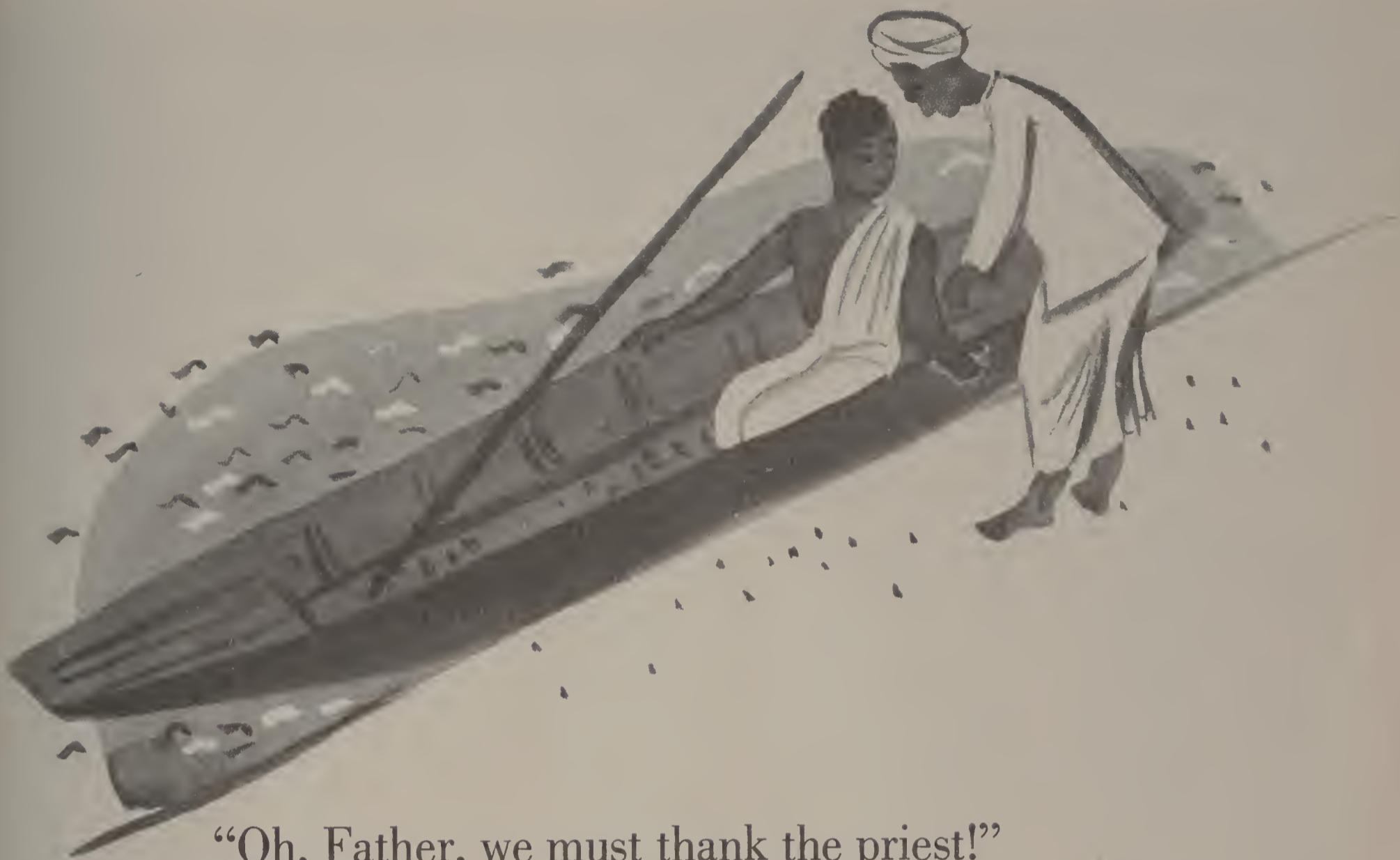
The priest took them across the lake

ture, the raft and the colored fire of the rockets, and her strange mysterious ride with the goddess over the dark water, was not all a dream. Only she felt sure deep in her heart, that somehow the big Meenakshi, her own particular goddess, had been taking care of her through it all.

It seemed, too, as though the kind Meenakshi was taking care of her still. Surely, surely she must have told their parents where to look for them. For as the boat neared the shore little Meenakshi saw two figures standing there, gazing about them, and she gave a loud squeal of joy.

“Amma, Amma. It’s my amma!”

She ran up the landing steps and into her mother’s arms. And while her mother hugged her tight, crying with gladness, Father asked them question after question, so fast they hardly had time to answer. Where had they been? What had happened to them? Everyone was so excited that they all tried to talk at once. Suddenly Meenakshi remembered the priest.



“Oh, Father, we must thank the priest!”

So Arumukam and his father went back to the boat, and thanked the priest for being so kind. Father gave him some money for the temple and the priest rowed away.

Meenakshi almost forgot how frightened she had been as she told her mother about the elephants, and how the goddess had smiled at her, and about the ride on the raft.



Then came the long ride home again



Then came the long ride home again in the ox cart. When they reached the village there were Janaki and Pushpam waiting to see Meenakshi. So she had to tell them the whole story all over again, and they all agreed that nothing so wonderful had ever happened to anyone before.

But for a long time afterward Meenakshi never went anywhere without keeping very tight hold of her mother's hand.





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